

THOMAS DIXON

North Carolina's Most Colorful Character
Of His Generation



Lawyer—Minister—Author
Orator—Playwright—Actor

An Address By

Lee B. Weathers, Publisher
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THOMAS DIXON, CAROLINA'S MOST COLORFUL CHARACTER

(By Lee B. Weathers)

We here in Cleveland county are living in a section which in Reconstruction days experienced horrible conditions such as prevail today in many parts of the war stricken nations of Europe.

White women were ravished, starvation stalked the land, Negroes, who had been suddenly set free, robbed and pillaged, drunken brutes seized the courts, and lawlessness reigned. Men and women, used to luxury, became beggars on the streets.

The most authentic stories of these stirring days, when colors clashed and the Whites fought to regain supremacy, were recorded for history by one of our distinguished Shelby townsmen, **Thomas Dixon**.

Mr. Dixon became the most versatile and colorful individual North Carolina ever produced. Legislator, preacher, actor, playwright, novelist, and motion picture producer, he rose to the pinnacle of fame and fortune, and his name became a household word in millions of American homes.

When I interviewed Tom Dixon in Raleigh the early part of 1945, he lay on a bed of affliction, tenderly waited on by his faithful wife Madeline, to whom he dedicated one of the last of his 28 books. For many years she was his research editor, a gifted writer in her own right, a woman whose loyalty and devotion to him was wonderful.

Mr. Dixon died in Raleigh in April of 1946 and his wife phoned me to arrange for his burial and funeral in Shelby, so in Sunset Cemetery, lies a man, brought back to the native county, after a most spectacular and colorful career in several fields of endeavor.

No one has successfully challenged him on the historic facts recorded in his books. These 28 books were not altogether histories, but flaming stories of love, adventure, intrigue, and, as they rolled from the presses in the heyday of his writing, millions of book-lovers bought and read them eagerly, and discussed them in club meetings and private gatherings.

THE DIXON FAMILY

Rev. Thomas Dixon, the elder, was a pioneer Baptist preacher, who moved in his younger days with that caravan to the West to seek fortune in Arkansas. The Civil War broke, and poverty, brought on by the ravages of war, forced their long trek back to Cleveland county with only \$100 savings in gold. With this he bought a modest home in Shelby and opened a little store hard-by. Churches were too poor to pay a salary, yet souls must be fed, and this he did without hope of reward, serving 32 Baptist churches in the course of his long life.

The Dixon family of three boys and two girls had brilliant minds and, being reared in hard circumstances, they learned the hard way.

Clarence became one of the most eminent Baptist divines, pastor of the big Moody church in Chicago, Spurgeon's church in London, and author of several religious books.

Addie married Dr. Thacker, an eminent Presbyterian evangelist, and wrote a number of novels. She still lives in Norfolk, Virginia.

Delia became the first woman physician in North Carolina, serving the 500 girls in the student body of Meredith for 35 years without a fatal illness.

Frank was a chatauqua lecturer, who had the gift of oratory somewhat like that of his brother Tom. His son, Frank, Jr., recently completed a term as Governor of his home state, Alabama.

REIGN OF TERROR

Tommie, about whom I wish to talk, was a mere lad in the Reconstruction period following the Civil War. His mind was at an impressionable age and he saw and studied the **Reign of Terror** to record in later life.

The veterans in Gray were trudging home in defeat. With determination, the ruined people hurried to the tasks of the field. Every woman and child, many of them gently reared, unused to toil, were plying, with delicate hands, the crudest tools. Some of them dragged brush for a harrow. Slave labor gone, stock killed or stolen, implements worn out, women and children did the work of the farm which Negroes had abandoned.

A young farmer hitched himself beside a milk cow and taught his wife and daughter to hold the handles. Hundreds and thousands of homes, right here in Cleveland county, **your ancestors and mine**, were without a dollar, without a pound of meat, or meal or flour.

FREEDOM AND REVOLUTION

Old Thaddeus Stevens was a power in Washington as a leader in Congress and virtual dictator of the Nation. He lived with a Negro woman and regarded the South as conquered territory, with our white people to be treated as subject to the will of a conquerer. Upon the death of Abraham Lincoln he determined to destroy Lincoln's plan of Reconstruction and enforce one of his own.

Stevens relied for successful working of his plan on the secret order of Negroes, native Scalawags and Carpetbaggers called "The Union League" and the ill-famed "Freedman's Bureau." These brutal political machines had headquarters with this sign hanging before thousands of doors in the villages and hamlets of the South. "A Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands," calling the Negro from the plow and, by a promise of confiscated lands, made him a political anarchist. Old Thad Stevens had introduced a bill in Congress to confiscate the lands of the Whites and give them to the Negroes, 40 acres and a mule. He made five military districts instead of the 11 old commonwealths, took the ballot from the Whites, enfranchised the whole Negro race, and set them to rule over their former masters. The situation was tense not only in Shelby but also throughout the South,—especially Tennessee and South Carolina. A local young hero was Colonel Leroy McAfee, uncle of young Tommie Dixon, who was witnessing the terror of the times. Col. McAfee lived on South Washington street, in the present Gardner-Webb home.

STEVENS BECOMES MASTER

Election time came. The United States Army, under the direction of the leaders in Washington at that time, was sent down in force to guard the voting of the Negroes in every district, as the new citizen Kings

marched to the polls to take the reins of power. The ballots were forwarded to the military Commandant at Charleston and the results announced. The Negroes and their Carpetbag and Scalawag associates had carried North Carolina.

In South Carolina, the Stevens revolutionists had elected to the Legislature 96 Negroes, eight renegades and 23 representatives of the White race. When this negroid legislature met in the capitol at Columbia, the scenes were unbelievable. Every dollar was drawn from the treasury and at once misappropriated or stolen outright. Bonds were issued for millions and stolen as fast as the money could be raised from their sale. A bar was established in the capitol building where gallons of whiskies, wine and choice champagnes were served free to its members.

In the capitol at Raleigh they not only set up a free bar and refreshment room, they established in the largest suite a house of prostitution for the exclusive use of its members. The Dixons, the Durhams, the Gardners, Hoeys, Webbs, Hamricks and other families whose names predominate in the county, would gather under the big aspen in front of the Dixon store facing Shelby's court square, to hear and discuss the distressing news from the Raleigh legislature.

ORDER OF CORRUPTION

The negroid government was in full swing, and an era of corruption had begun. Every man of the NEW ORDER was out for all the money the traffic would bear. When they voted themselves all the funds of the treasury in mileage and per diem, they took the school fund and then sold a half million dollars worth of its bonds for a beggarly hundred thousand and divided the proceeds.

The Raleigh capital gang picked up everything they could lay hands on. They refurnished the Senate and House halls. They got an appropriation of \$200,000 for furniture, paid \$17,000 for it, thus stealing \$180,000 on a single item.

Three hundred thousand was voted for "supplies, sundries and incidentals." With it they established the bar, dispensing free liquor and cigars to the members, their

friends and the prostitutes strolled daily into the galleries smiling on their favorites below.

All over North Carolina the collapse of Law was complete in the degradation of the Judiciary and the reduction of the courts to obscene farces.

Conditions were becoming tense. They were intolerable to the Whites. White men could no longer stand the insults to their women or the drunkenness, the debauchery and the thievery that was going on.

One morning the Shelby citizens awoke to find an adventurer named **Kirk** from Tennessee with a company of ragged, filthy looking men, carrying muskets with fixed bayonets, camping on the Court Square. They had torn the palings from the fences around the Square and built a bonfire against the root of an oak shade tree. A half dozen of them were pitching their bayonets against the court house door until they riddled two panels.

North Carolina's Governor had sent them to Shelby to suppress the Ku Klux Klan,—the Invisible Empire, organized by white men to protect themselves and their families from raging mobs.

The stories of the Clash of Colors, the rise and fall of the Klan, the Freedmen's Bureau, and the Union League, are all vividly told in Tom Dixon's series of novels. He lived through and witnessed the Reign of Terror. He lived to see peace settle down on a troubled South, which in these eighty years has recovered from the havoc of those dreadful, dreary days.

Tom Dixon didn't hate Negroes. He loved them because he understood and sympathized with them. One little Black boy became his bosom companion and playmate. The pickaninny had tickled his drunken father with a straw in his sleep. The brute arose and nearly cut the child's head off. Tommie and his mother took him to Dr. O. P. Gardner, who sewed his head back on. Out of gratitude, Dick remained faithfully with Tommy until he went off to Wake Forest College.

At 14½ years of age he experienced his first love with Mollie Durham. His friend Bob Ryburn helped him write the note ask-

ing for an engagement to take Mollie to church, the only form of dissipation and entertainment at that time. She accepted, and Tommie accompanied the girl to the First Baptist Church, perspiring and praying earnestly and humbly, that "God would get me out of this somehow."

ENTERS WAKE FOREST

The gangly youth entered Wake Forest College and there made friendship with R. T. Vann, the armless boy, who later became president of Meredith College, and W. L. Po-teat, afterwards president of Wake Forest College for 20 years. He studied hard, won medals, developed as a debator and platform speaker, and finished the institution with honors. A life-size painting of Thomas Dixon now hangs in the Euzelian Literary Society Hall where he developed the arts that won him fame and fortune on platform, in pulpit and in the literary world.

After graduation from Wake Forest his savings were spent and his preacher father was a virtual pauper. There were no funds to finance a further education which Tommy eagerly wanted. Father Dixon served four churches, but the membership was small and couldn't pay the shepherd any set amount. Only a few small coins were dropped into the collection plate on preaching days. Preacher Dixon farmed and ran a store for a living. He never mentioned money from the pulpit. Knowing Tom's eagerness for a Master's degree, he went to see Deacon Hoyle, in the Prospect community, and got a loan. Deacon Hoyle brought out a heavy tin box, piled on the table a lot of gold, silver and greenbacks and counted out the money.

The only stipulation was that Brother Dixon pay back bill for bill, coin for coin. Tom wondered and inquired why. The father wagged his head and said, "not so funny as you might think. Deacon Hoyle has lived through an era of wildcat money, state money, county money, private bank issues."

ENTERS JOHNS HOPKINS

That fall he entered Johns Hopkins University for a postgraduate course in political science and history. Herbert Adams and Richard Ely were inspiring men of that faculty. Woodrow Wilson, although eight years

older than Tom, sat with him at the Seminary table and they became intimate friends.

Tom developed a passion for the theater. He decided to become an actor, so he deserted his school work, against the advice of Woodrow Wilson, and went to New York. There he saw Edwin Booth play Hamlet, and heard Adelina Patti in grand opera, who sang "Home Sweet Home" as no one else could sing it.

Over in the Shelby cemetery lies the body of Captain Durham, another great lover of music. On his monument is inscribed the fact that he once rode a horse from Shelby to Charleston to hear Adelina Patti sing.

On his way home from New York Tom decided to become a lawyer, settle in Shelby, and make a fortune. He wanted to keep up the high traditions of his family set by Colonel Leroy McAfee. The atmosphere of the North had stirred in him a passion for riches.

RUNS FOR LEGISLATURE

In order to get before the people, Father Dixon suggested that Tom run for the legislature. He could make a rousing stump speech, and was effective in debate. He wrote out his card and put it in the next issue of the Shelby paper. Immediately he began feverish preparation of a speech. Captain John W. Gidney, a Confederate veteran, had served two terms, and was seeking a re-election. The campaign opened with a bang with a public debate in every township of the county (South Carolina's present style).

Tom boldly attacked his rival and demanded a chance for the younger generation. Twenty years had passed since the war and they were still voting for colonels and majors and captains, said he. Now he asked the voters to give Confederate sons a chance. He surprised himself as a speech-maker. He surprised his audience, not alone his opponent.

Dozens of veterans were trailing Dixon and Gidney from township to township to hear the campaign speeches. The people had little else to do. It developed into a dogfight, and they enjoyed seeing the fur fly. On the third day, Tom reached the Captain's record. He played a trick on the Captain for which he was not prepared. Said the young student:

"Gentlemen, Captain Gidney claims that he made a creditable record in the four years he represented Cleveland county at Raleigh. He didn't go into details. I will. Here on a paper is a complete copy of his record of work, which I will now read."

Dixon paused, drew a wallet from his inner pocket, took out a BIG envelope, drew a tiny pair of tweezers, and with **great difficulty** clamped them on the record and held it up before the huge crowd.

"Here gentlemen;" he shouted. "It is all written on this paper, the exact size of a postage stamp. I'll read it to you, if the tweezers don't slip."

KNEW SHOWMANSHIP

The crowd yelled. The Captain's face grew scarlet. Tom read the caption of a few unimportant bills which the Captain had introduced, and each one drew a laugh. The trick caught the fancy of a rough and tumble audience and Dixon won two to one.

Elected to the legislature before he was 21, Dixon ran for the speakership, but saw defeat, and withdrew in favor of Lee S. Overman, who later became United States Senator. He could take defeat and bound ahead, as his further life story reveals.

Having studied for the stage, Dixon knew showmanship. As a youth in the legislature, he decided to deliver his maiden speech before the Finance Committee on his bill to **pension** disabled Confederate soldiers of the state, the first measure to pension Confederate soldiers introduced in a Southern legislature. The discussion of the bill by the press during the hearings had stirred the country. He spoke to a crowded House and packed galleries, and scored a hit. The speech was published in every important Southern paper. The pension bill was passed, and every one of the eleven Southern states followed with a similar measure.

Interest in his first political triumph soon waned, and after he returned from the Capitol he began to read Law in earnest, entering a private law school in Greensboro. It was in Greensboro that he met Marriett Bussey, a girl who was to change his life. Her folks were good Baptists, and her genial bro-

ther, Rev. Ben Bussey, was pastor of the First Baptist Church in Shelby.

Following a resistless impulse, he visited her home in Columbus, Ga., a beautiful **white pillared mansion** of the Old South (now the Commandant's headquarters at Fort Benning), and on the banks of the Chattahoochee river they declared their love, and were later married.

At his request, the church at Wake Forest **restored** his name to the roll and formally inducted him into the ministry. His first pastorate was at Goldsboro, where he stayed for six months, then six months at the Tabernacle in Raleigh. His fame as a pulpiteer grew, and a call came from the Roxbury section of Boston, Mass. There he entered a circle of brilliant men, scholars and tireless students. Dixon was 24 then. A lot of Northern speakers had their peculiar opinions about the South, and uttered criticisms that Dixon felt bound to resent and defend. He could not bear to have the South misrepresented and misunderstood, so he entered a long period of study to write a defense of the South, in an effort to destroy bitter sectionalism which still prevailed.

SUGGESTS LLD FOR WILSON

Wake Forest College asked Dixon to deliver the commencement address, and on that visit he suggested that the College confer the LLD degree on Woodrow Wilson, which was done, and this started Wilson on the road to the presidency.

Dixon moved down from Boston to New York. He had come to love the Yankees. Here he started his pastorate for the building of a great Temple (The People's Church), near the site of the 23d Street Church. His striking physique, his powers of speech and dramatic deliverance, swelled his crowds. Pretty soon the 3,000 capacity auditorium was overflowing, and Dixon started a campaign to raise a million dollar building fund. John D. Rockefeller assured Dixon that, if he would raise half a million, he would give a half million, and the campaign was off. Church jealousies and prejudice, however, halted the campaign.

The militant and lively Dixon would devote a few minutes before his sermons each morning to a discussion of the topics of the day, gleaned from the newspapers. This drew people by the thousands. It was not long before he was tackling Tammany, supporting Dr. Charles H. Parkhurst, who had charged that the master political machine was rotten to the core, protecting saloons within the very shadow of the churches, protecting the criminal element and encouraging prostitution. The bitter fight for morality and sobriety wrecked his health, but the New York newspapers had publicised his sermons and speeches, so that Tom Dixon became one of the best known men in New York.

HIS FIRST NOVEL

Into the writing of "The Leopard's Spots," his first novel, had gone ten years of reading, which had been preceded by 25 years of living its scenes. He was lecturing now and swaying audiences throughout the nation. They had listened to and applauded the youthful southern orator. The manuscript for the first novel was sent to Walter H. Page, a North Carolinian whose friendship he had made in the newspaper business in New York. Page was a member of the publishing firm of Doubleday-Page. Twenty-four hours after Mr. Page received and read "The Leopard's Spots," he wired Dixon to come at once to New York to discuss a contract.

The book was a hit. Sales reached 100,000 copies before the first semi-annual royalty report was received. He had given the South a hearing. Club women read and discussed it. News critics praised and flayed it.

After such success with "The Leopard's Spots," he set to writing "The Clansman." He dug through 5,000 pamphlets and books in a year's study, preparing the notes, and, when he was ready, he wrote the narrative in thirty days, working 16 hours a day. This book proved a great sensation—so great that he decided to write a play based on the novel.

The Clansman, as a stage play was written and directed by Thomas Dixon himself and his associate, for Dixon had made a study of the stage and was no amateur. He had real talent. After months of preparation, the

premiere performance opened at Norfolk. The house was packed. The show was a thrilling success. The audience laughed, cheered, cried, and shouted. Dixon knew his fortune was made. That company made \$50,000 on the trial run of the first company.

The Clansman played to larger audiences in the North than in the South, because the theaters had larger seating capacities. It came to Shelby with Mr. Dixon taking a lead part. Fifteen hundred saw the show, and welcomed home Tom Dixon, calling him to the front of the stage between curtains for a speech. A thousand or more couldn't get seats, but they came to town. It was a gala occasion, for the scenes from *The Clansman* were enacted hereabouts.

FIRST PICTURE

Dixon tried to interest a motion picture house in producing a picture based on *The Clansman*. In vain he offered his script, but was turned down. Finally he found a new company headed by H. E. Aitken. The company had little money but high ideals and a good director, D. W. Griffith, a Southerner, who had read *The Clansman* with enthusiasm. Griffith took the scenario on a **royalty** basis and worked on the production for two years, with many disappointments. Finally it was filmed, but show houses were reluctant to run it, because of the conflicting subject it portrayed.

Woodrow Wilson was now president. He was a former student with Tom Dixon. Dixon had the LLD degree conferred upon him at Wake Forest College.

With ample self-confidence Dixon sought and got an appointment to see President Wilson. After talking over bygone days, Dixon asked a favor of Mr. Wilson, **not** as chief executive of the Republic but as a scholar and student of History and Sociology. He wanted The President to witness "The Birth of a Nation" at a **private showing**. The President could not go to a theater because Mrs. Wilson had just died and the White House was in mourning, but he consented to see the film in the East room. And the President volunteered to invite the Cabinet, the Supreme Court, and their families, to the showing. Emotions were stirred to the depth. No

press release was allowed that such dignitaries had gathered to see a picture, but the word was whispered around and this gave prestige to the film.

FIRST MILLION DOLLAR MOVIE

"Birth of a Nation" became at once the sensation of season. Authors, artists, musicians, teachers, clergymen and motion picture producers crowded in line to see it, and came back again. It was the first **MILLION DOLLAR movie production**, the like of which was not equaled again until "Gone with the Wind."

Some cities tried to suppress the film, and the producers were forced to spend \$115,000 in legal fees and other expenses to keep it showing against opposition. The controversies, however, had brought front page advertising worth millions, which could not have been bought at any price.

When the noise of battle had subsided, the producers awaked to the fact that they were the owners of the **greatest piece of property** ever created in the theater. **Twelve companies** were required to fill the bookings in theaters at \$2 a seat. On an investment of barely \$65,000, the producers played to more than ten million persons. Stockholders in the film received 550 per cent on their investment in weekly dividends the first nine months. Ten companies ran full time for five years.

The Clansman was a "best seller" and reached a circulation of more than a **million copies**, but The Birth of a Nation, founded on it, in ten years, was seen by a **hundred million people**. It ran for **ten years** and yielded **18 million dollars**, establishing the all-time record for box office receipts. Over five million copies of his books were sold.

His autobiography, on which he was working at the time he was stricken ill, has never been published. It should be, by all means. It tells the story, as I said in the beginning, of the **Most Versatile, Most Spectacular man** North Carolina has produced.

A FREE SPENDER

At the peak of his success, he owned a handsome brownstone front home on Riverside Drive, New York, overlooking the Hudson river, cruised in the Chesapeake Bay on an elegant sail boat, enjoyed hunting birds, ducks and geese around Dixondale, Va., and Eastern Carolina, where he owned homes and hunting preserves.

Mr. Dixon was a free spender, venture-some and chance-taking when money was plentiful. He suffered many reverses, the most damaging of which was his attempt to develop Wildacres, a beautiful mountain retreat near Little Switzerland in Western Carolina, in the boom days of 1929.

He was a handsome man, standing six feet four inches, erect and majestic in his movements. His hair was gray, and his shaggy gray brow shaded his piercing brown eyes. Passing him on the street, one would turn and take a second look, so striking was his appearance.

On the lecture platform he was eloquent and forceful. He could move and sway an audience as no other man of his generation. It was common for him to speak to audiences of 4,000 and more; and at many of his appearances, policemen were on hand to control the crowds seeking to hear him.

As a representative of the National Recovery Administration, he toured the country for the Roosevelt administration, translating into terms of ringing conviction and inspiration the fundamental meaning of the NRA program. For four months he held thousands spellbound by his matchless eloquence, reaching new heights in his long career as an orator. Everywhere he pleaded for faith in our future, based on the glorious story of America's past. Everywhere the response was electric.

In 1937 Judge Isaac M. Meekins, of the Eastern District Court, out of friendship formed when they were schoolmates at Wake Forest, appointed him Clerk of the Eastern District Court. He served until the snows of many winters, and a life filled with dramatic action, forced him to retire.

GAVE LIBRARY TO G-W COLLEGE

Tom Dixon reflected glory and honor on the country and state of his birth, which he always loved and never forgot. I suggested that he give his library of 1400 books, and nine original paintings from which the color plates for his books were made, to Gardner-Webb College. This collection is now at the college to inspire and help other sons and daughters of Cleveland to overcome obstacles and make the best of their opportunities.

After each war comes a social and economic upheaval. We had it after the Civil War, and Tom Dixon translated the period into stirring stories and into fortunes which he completely lost. We are now undergoing an upheaval, following the recent war, but one not so dramatic and trying on men's souls. After reading Dixon's stories of what our forbears endured in the SIXTIES, we should feel a keener appreciation of the heritage they left us.

The South has reestablished itself, and is today an important and powerful segment of our national life. Although not completely solved, the race problem is in our hands and we can handle it better **than outsiders can tell us how.**

After this war will come an unprecedented period of development and expansion such as the South has never witnessed before. No country in all the world has been through such turmoil and travail as the South following the Civil War and bounded out of it so completely and so quickly.

Thomas Dixon lived to see this transition before he died April 2nd, 1946. He rejoiced in the recovery of his once-stricken Southland and on April 4th his body returned to the soil of the county that gave him birth and which he loved so dearly.



Monument in Sunset Cemetery erected by friends of Thomas Dixon in recognition of the glory he shed upon the county of his birth.